



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Rural Development

A photograph of a rural landscape featuring a vast field of yellow wildflowers in the foreground. In the background, there are several farm buildings, including a large barn and a smaller house, and a prominent white water tower with a red roof. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

USDA Rural Development Rural Alaska Village Grant Program

A close-up photograph of a young child with dark hair, smiling warmly at the camera. The child is holding a fluffy, light-brown puppy close to their face. The child is wearing a dark jacket with a light blue collar. The background is a blurred, scenic view of snow-capped mountains and a forest.

Transforming Lives in Rural Alaska Villages

Many Alaska Villages Still Need Water and Sanitation Systems

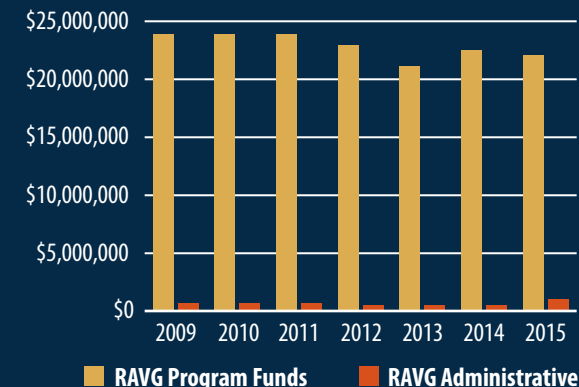


USDA's Rural Alaska Village Grant Program (RAVG) was created in 1994 to address the urgent need for adequate water and sewer systems in Alaska's most remote rural villages. Primarily inhabited by Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut tribes, these sparsely populated villages

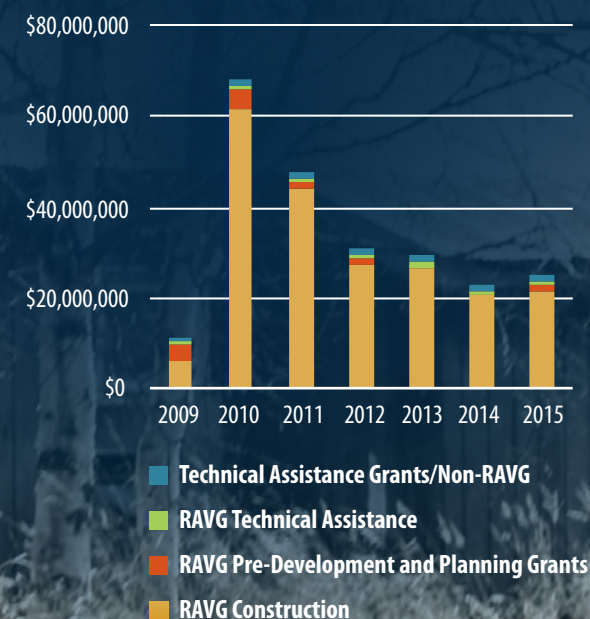
are among the poorest communities in the Nation and, although progress has been made, many villages are still without running water and sanitation systems. In these villages, water must be hauled from a community source or from untreated rivers or streams, and residents use 5-gallon buckets (commonly referred to as "honeybuckets") or pit privies to dispose of human waste. In many villages, communal washbasins are used, which can easily transmit bacteria and affect the health of the entire village, especially children.

For over two decades, RAVG has been helping Alaska's rural or Native American villages construct water and waste disposal systems to address rural villages' most dire water and sanitation needs. Working with program partners, USDA has provided more than \$397 million in funding to 130 Alaska villages since its inception in 1994. Thanks to RAVG's success, nearly 98,000 village residents have benefited from water and sewage disposal projects and are enjoying better health as a benefit of improved sanitation.

RAVG Appropriations 2009-2015



RAVG Projects Funded FY 2009-2015



How RAVG Works

Through the RAVG grants, USDA provides funding for the planning, development, and construction of water and wastewater systems to improve health and sanitation conditions in rural Alaska villages. RAVG grants can also be used, in some situations, to install piped sewer and water systems, wells, septic systems, and plumbing in individual homes if the residents cannot afford to pay for the improvements themselves. In addition to project funding, RAVG grants can be used to provide technical assistance and training. RAVG provides funding for the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation's Remote Maintenance Worker Program, which provides training and technical assistance to rural water and sewer operators through a circuit rider program, and also provides technical assistance funding to the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) for energy improvements.

Participant Eligibility

To qualify for RAVG funding, the village must have a:



Population of 10,000 or less



Median income that does not exceed 110% of the State nonmetropolitan median income



Dire sanitation condition

RAVG Partners

The RAVG program, like other USDA Rural Development programs, leverages partnerships to achieve results. To ensure that RAVG funds result in timely, quality service to Alaska villages, USDA Rural Development relies on a strong working relationship with Federal, State, and nonprofit partners. Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) administers the Village Safe Water Program, which works with rural Alaska communities to develop sustainable sanitation facilities. DEC also administers Alaska's Remote Maintenance Worker Program. ANTHC provides health services to Alaska Natives and American Indians in Alaska. Other partners include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Indian Health Service (IHS).



ALASKA NATIVE
TRIBAL HEALTH
CONSORTIUM



Types of Water and Sanitation Systems Funded With RAVG Grants

A variety of systems can be funded with RAVG grants. Care is taken when planning the project to build a system that will best meet the needs of a particular village. RAVG construction grants can be used to pay for:

PIPED WATER AND SEWER SYSTEMS

Centralized systems where water is piped directly to individual homes.



TANK HAUL SYSTEMS

Village homes have separate tanks for drinking water and wastewater. Service providers fill the water tanks and remove (haul) the waste from storage tanks.



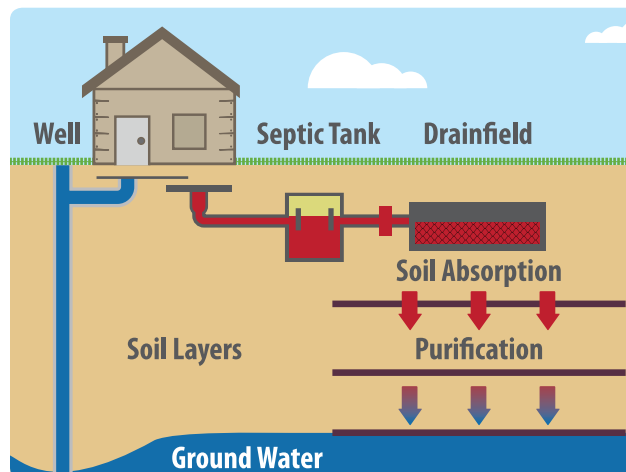
WASHETERIAS

Village-owned buildings for public use that have toilets, drinking water that can be carried home, and laundry and shower facilities.



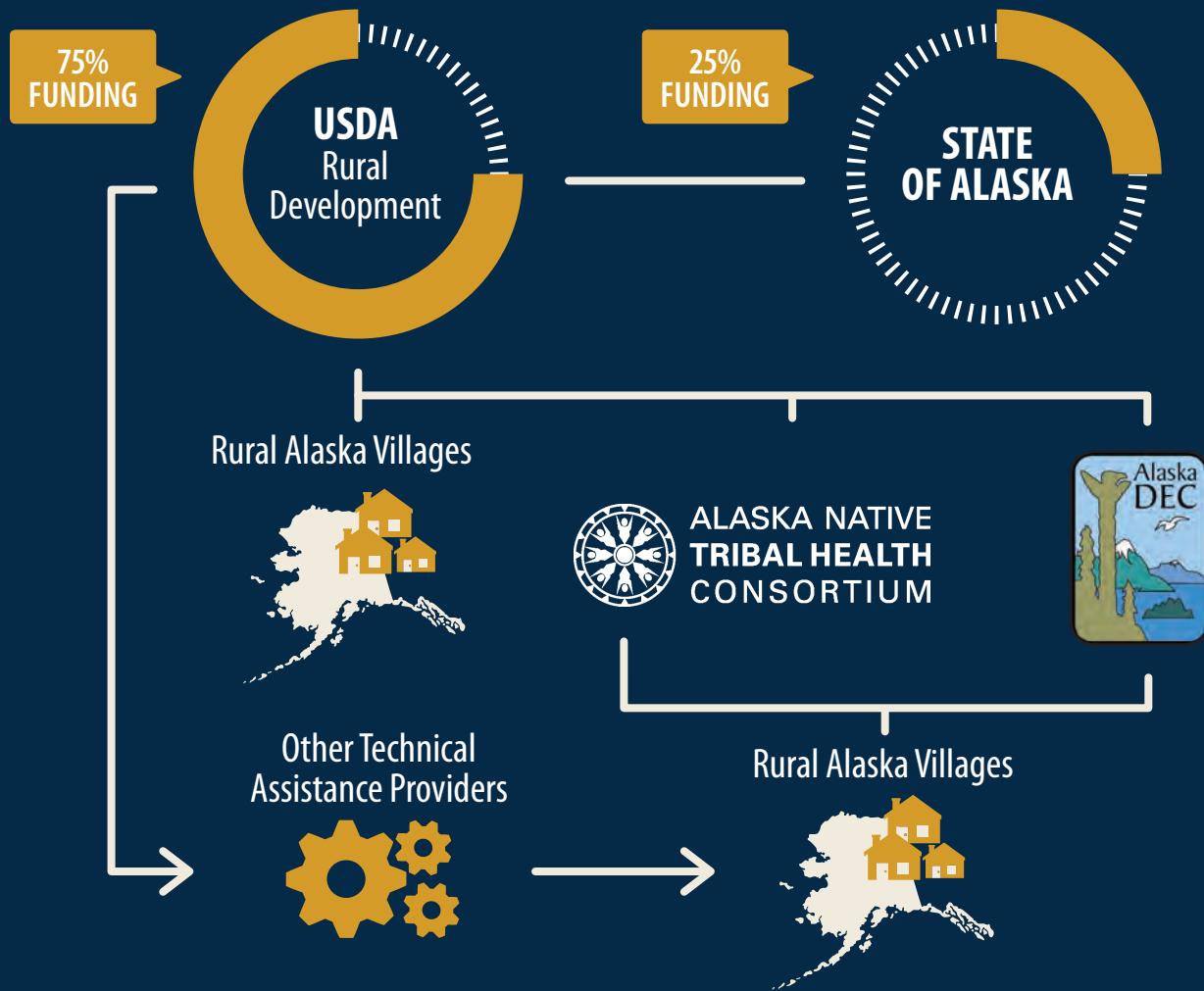
INDIVIDUAL WELLS AND SEPTIC SYSTEMS

Can also be funded if individual facilities make the most sense for the village.



RAVG: Where Partnership and Process Meet

RAVG grants can be awarded directly to a rural or Native American village or to DEC or ANTHC on behalf of a rural Alaska village. USDA Rural Development will pay up to 75 percent of an approved project's cost. The State of Alaska must fund 25 percent of the total project cost.



STEP 1

Communities and partners submit applications through the Capital Investment Project process, then the partners meet to discuss and score potential projects. High-scoring projects are prioritized.

STEP 2

DEC and ANTHC bundle project proposals and submit a funding request on behalf of multiple villages. Villages can apply individually, but most projects are submitted by DEC and ANTHC.

STEP 3

If approved, USDA obligates funds for the project. USDA will fund up to 75 percent of a project's cost, and the State of Alaska must fund 25 percent. Funds are designated for specific projects and cannot be transferred for use in other RAVG projects.

STEP 4

ANTHC and DEC oversee project construction, track funding for each project, and report back to USDA.

STEP 5

USDA conducts independent audits of RAVG activities.

Pre-Development and Planning: The Key to Success

In addition to funding construction costs, RAVG grants can also be used to pay for planning and pre-development costs that are associated with a project (PPG grants). Allowable planning costs include costs for needed master plans, feasibility studies, and detection or source studies. RAVG grants of up to \$1 million per village can be used to fund pre-development costs to pay for the preliminary engineering and environmental reports, application development, review and establishment of rights-of-way and easement, and full construction design that is needed in order to apply for construction funding. RAVG grants of up to 4 percent of the annual RAVG funding may also be used for training and technical assistance.



BENEFITS

- ✓ Improved coordination can help more villages in the planning process.
- ✓ Villages in the planning process can be helped while construction projects are underway in other villages.
- ✓ Better Government investment and use of funds.
- ✓ RAVG construction funds are obligated based on well-planned and priced systems. Construction funds are not “parked” on a

- project while pre-development activities occur, freeing up funding for construction projects.
- ✓ Reduction/elimination of cost overruns.
- ✓ Reduced processing time.
- ✓ PPGs require less documentation than a full RAVG application, are quickly funded, and are used to develop documents needed for construction, which makes processing of construction grants more efficient.

RAVG Streamlining: From Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to Regulation

Working with fellow RAVG partners, USDA led a streamlining initiative in 2010 to identify ways to simplify and expedite the RAVG application process and enable villages to more fully utilize program funds. While the RAVG program had made inroads prior to 2010, Federal and State processes were not aligned: not all projects were being completed, and village residents were experiencing delays in getting much-needed water and sanitation services. The streamlining effort was initiated to redesign RAVG processes and create a more effective Federal/State, public/private partnership to benefit rural and Native Alaskans.



USDA and partners sign the agreement in June 2011.

The RAVG Process Improvement Conference was held in Anchorage, Alaska, in April 2010. Representatives from USDA, DEC, ANTHC, EPA, IHS, and the Denali Commission participated in the conference. The conference was successful and resulted in an MOU between USDA, IHS, DEC, and ANTHC that was signed on June 15, 2011. The MOU contained guidelines to ensure fiscal accountability, improve and streamline application procedures, and facilitate improved cooperation between the MOU partners.

KEY MOU COMPONENTS

- Revised application review – applications are reviewed to determine grant need only
- Separate funding for planning and construction
- New single master application process
- Improved reporting and tracking measures
- Single lead for environmental and historical preservation

A New Rule For RAVG

A final rule for the RAVG program was published in September 2015 and is now in effect. A separate rule was created for RAVG in order to formally incorporate the streamlined processes of the MOU into USDA regulations.

RAVG Results

The new RAVG process is achieving results. More rural Alaskan villagers have water and waste services.

98,293



Alaskan Villagers Served

\$397,858,409



RAVG Project Funding

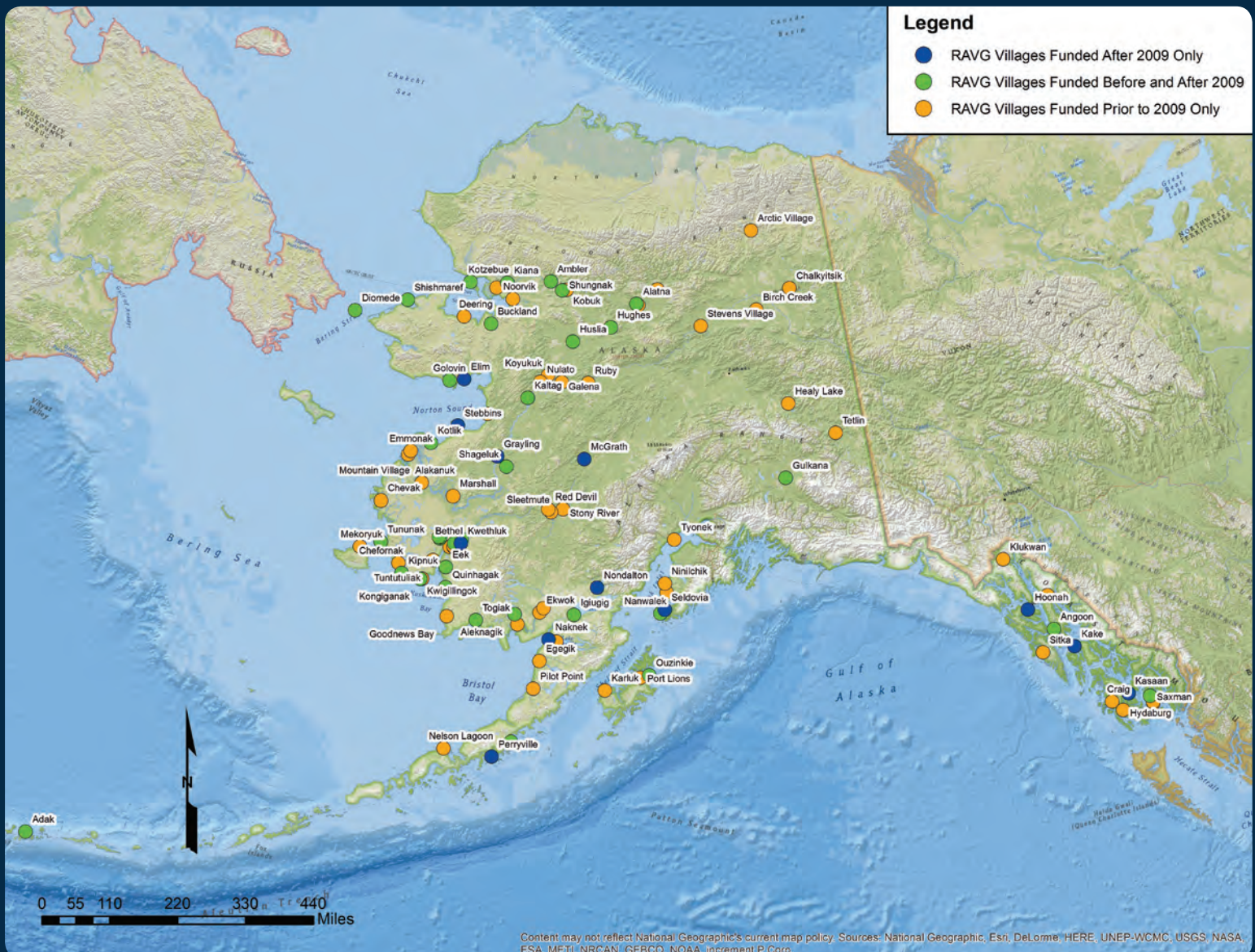
211 Projects



67 PPG Grants



144 Construction



RAVG in Action: Transforming Village Lives

Kwethluk

March 2014 was a month of celebration, as many of Kwethluk's unserved homes received much-anticipated running water and indoor plumbing, marking the near end of a 15-year effort to bring a water and sanitation system to this Yupik village of 700 residents in western Alaska. Children and adults alike enjoyed watching clear, drinkable water splash from faucets into kitchen and bathroom sinks. For the first time in many of their lives, they could flush toilets, wash their hands and dishes in warm water, and luxuriate in a warm bath.

In 2011, \$110,000 in USDA Rural Development RAVG funds were used to complete a sanitation facilities master plan and, with the help of additional RAVG grants of \$5.5 million in 2012 and \$4.6 million in 2013, the first Kwethluk homes began receiving

water and sewer service in November 2013. Constructed in stages, the first phase of the project resulted in the construction of a sewage lagoon and water treatment plant, followed by the building of a water storage tank, waste collection system, and underground piped water. Most homes were also outfitted with basic indoor plumbing and fixtures.

During a visit to rural Alaska in the spring of 2014, USDA Rural Development's Deputy Under Secretary Patrice Kunesh was able to see first-hand the need for RAVG assistance while visiting the home of 90-year-old Kwethluk resident Xenia Nikoli (pictured above with Jim Nordlund, Alaska State Director, USDA Rural Development). As Kunesh relates, "upon inviting me into her spotlessly clean house, she embraced me, then wept and apologized for the stench of the overflowing 'honey bucket' sitting



Kwethluk resident Xenia Nikoli, pictured with USDA Rural Development Alaska State Director Jim Nordlund, got indoor plumbing for the first time in 2014.

imposingly in her tiny bathroom." Deeply moved, Kunesh leaned into her and told her that it was she who should apologize to her. Nikoli's home was subsequently equipped with indoor plumbing, and she began receiving service at the end of the summer.



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2



3

Pitkas Point



Troubled with a history of environmental contaminations to its water source, including two fuel spills, Pitkas Point residents were thrilled to finally abandon their “honey pots” for running water and piped sewer service to their individual homes. The \$11 million project, completed in September 2011, brought a water treatment plant, water tank, and a new washeteria to Pitkas Point and equipped the village’s 30 homes with in-home plumbing and fixtures.

Before receiving water and sewer services, the village’s 150 residents would haul fresh water back to their homes from the

central washeteria and empty sewage from honey buckets into the village’s waste lagoon. Raw sewage from brimming buckets was frequently spilled onto village roads. Residents of villages such as Pitkas Point, who are exposed to raw sewage and share water for cleaning and handwashing, experience significantly greater incidences of water-borne respiratory, gastrointestinal, and skin diseases than village residents with access to modern water and sanitation systems.



In an October 15, 2011, YouTube video produced by the Alaska Dispatch News, village leader and 28-year Pitkas Point resident John Riley, Sr., describes the

new, and very welcome, indoor plumbing in his bathroom. Pointing to his bathtub with a big smile, he says “That’s where I take a hot swim every evening, sometimes twice a day – Why not?” With one finger on the toilet handle, he demonstrates the ease of flushing: “one finger and it’s all gone; it’s so awesome to have running water, you know?” Riley, Sr., isn’t the only one enjoying his bath. To celebrate, the village children held a competition to see who would take the first bath.

The Pitkas Point project was completed under budget with funding from USDA Rural Development, the State of Alaska, and IHS. USDA Rural Development contributed \$9.1 million in RAVG construction grants and \$378,966 for a pre-planning grant to fund the project. Because the project’s final cost was less than original estimates, some of the RAVG funding was returned to USDA.



4



5



6

1 Atmautluak

2 Ft. Yukon

3 Hooper Bay

4 Kasaan

5 Kwethluk

6 Old Kasigluk

The Future of RAVG

The work of USDA, the RAVG program, and our funding partners is not finished. Together we will continue to:

- Improve coordination of technical assistance with RAVG partners and technical assistance providers
- Deliver high-quality programs and services
- Collaborate to improve the design and energy efficiency of water and waste systems, not only to lower villages' fuel costs but to also build systems that can better withstand Alaska's harsh environment and address the unique needs and lack of infrastructure in Alaska's remote rural villages
- Focus on the building of water and sewer systems to ensure long-term sustainability in Alaska villages and provide the training necessary to enable villagers to operate and maintain their systems
- Finance critical construction and design projects for villages still in need





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Maps created by the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation.

Photo Credits

Honey buckets and a sewage bunker in Pitkas Point (p. 2), Jill Burke, Alaska Dispatch News

Flush tank and haul system (p. 4), CoWater Alaska, Inc.

Well and septic diagram with ground water (p. 4), Pacific Northwest Region Water Program Blog

Washeteria, Atmautluak, Alaska (p. 8), State of Alaska

Eric Kaiser plays with water in the sink in Hooper Bay (p. 8), Water and sewer lines being buried in Kwethluk, Alaska (p. 9), Bob Hallinen for the Anchorage Daily News

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January 2016

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